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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 000805

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: ECUADOR: STRIKE FIZZLES, BACK TO DIALOGUE

REF: QUITO 795

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney. Reason 1.4 (b&d).

1. (C) Summary: Strike activities organized by municipal and provincial leaders in the capital took place generally peacefully on April 13, but did not close the city as intended. Protests attracted far fewer participants than an earlier, February 16 protest march. Strike organizers claimed victory nonetheless. Authorities acted with restraint, selectively using tear gas to dislodge some protesters. The Ambassador called President Gutierrez to urge him to renew his call for peaceful political dialogue; Gutierrez said he intended to do so. We expect Quito to return to normal overnight, but further protests are possible on April 14, as Congress returns to debate competing proposals to resolve the Supreme court controversy. End Summary.

Strike Impact Less Than Expected

2. (SBU) In the capital, strike organizers dispersed early to strategic locations throughout the city to protest and block traffic by burning tires. The choke points were selected to block transit into and leaving the city; most roads remained open to internal traffic, except for the colonial city center. Police cordoned off the central square in front of the presidential palace, which stayed largely empty throughout the day. Because organizers did not plan a march, the number of protesters in one place rarely exceeded 6-7,000. Police used teargas to disperse protesters at several downtown locations throughout the strike day, reducing the numbers of protesters in any one location. The promised presence of indigenous protesters did not materialize--the bulk of protesters appeared to be college-aged students.

3. (SBU) Most police deployed without weapons except tear gas and batons, minimizing the possibility for tragedy. No violent incidents or injuries were reported. Most capital residents chose to take the day off and shop or visit city parks for recreation. Traffic was about half the normal during rush hour, and banks, shopping malls, and other businesses opened normally. A feared water shortage did not occur, after the government convinced an Amazonian mayor to keep the supply valves open. Electricity and other services were not interrupted.

4. (SBU) Elsewhere, most of the country was indifferent to the Quito protests. In just four other highland provinces--Imbabura, Chimborazo, Cotopaxi and Azuay--parallel protests, involving highway blockages, reportedly took place. More extensive blockages and demonstrations occurred in Azuay's provincial capital of Cuenca. As in Quito, no violent incidents or injuries were reported.

Back to Dialogue

5. (C) The Ambassador called President Gutierrez as the strike actions were dissipating, to praise GOE restraint and commitment to free expression, and urge conciliation. No one wins a strike, she said, what is important is what comes next. Now would be an opportune moment to renew his call for political dialogue. Gutierrez said he agreed completely, and that by reporting to work most Quito residents had demonstrated their interest in seeing Ecuador overcome its challenges and move forward. He hoped to do by promoting new legislation in Congress to resolve the festering Supreme Court issue. Minister of Government Ayerve struck a similar note of conciliation, saying he would focus his televised address later that evening on the president's legislative proposal.

6. (C) Other government officials were less conciliatory, with Vice Minister of Government Edison Carrera telling us the strike was a "total failure," as measured by the dispersion and low turnout of the protesters. Most protesters, he claimed, were paid employees of the Pichincha provincial council or the Quito municipal council.

What's Next?

7. (C) With the strike apparently coming to a close, we

expect attention to shift back toward Congress, where competing proposals to resolve the Supreme Court issue will be debated. Further opposition protest marches are likely, to keep the pressure on Congress to act. The two legislative proposals differ on when the current court would be terminated, and how the new court would be selected. The opposition proposal, which failed by a one-vote margin on April 12, would terminate the current court immediately on passage, prior to the selection of a new court. The government's proposal, which must pass through committee to the plenary for two debates before a final vote, would terminate the current court only after the new court is selected. At this point, neither side has the 51 votes needed to pass reform legislation.

18. (C) The April 12 congressional vote against the opposition proposal reunited the government with its earlier alliance partners, including ex-president Abdala Bucaram's PRE and banana-magnate Alvaro Noboa's PRIAN, neither of which supports changes to the current Supreme Court. The government's proposal is therefore unlikely to pass without a new effort to woo support from the opposition.
KENNEY